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ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom (UK) has four separate education systems, each with different traditions. In Scotland and Wales all state-funded secondary schooling is comprehensive, whereas in Northern Ireland it is selective, and in England there are regional differences in the extent of selection. This briefing considers whether differences among the four education systems are associated with different levels of social inequality in attainment. The briefing focuses on students aged 16 in 1990. It finds that evidence from this research provides support for the comprehensive system. Cites 4 related publications. (Author/BT)

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CES Briefing

# Inequality in Attainment at Age 16: A 'Home International' Comparison

by Linda Croxford

No. 19, May 2000

**The UK has four separate education systems, each with different traditions. In Scotland and Wales all state-funded secondary schooling is comprehensive, whereas in Northern Ireland it is selective, and in England there are regional differences in the extent of selection. In this *Briefing* we consider whether differences between the four education systems are associated with different levels of social inequality in attainment. We focus on pupils aged 16 in 1990.**

- **The** major difference between the four UK education systems was the extent to which secondary schools were comprehensive or selective.
- **There** were further differences between the systems in the proportion of pupils attending independent schools, denominational schools or single-sex schools.
- **Pupils** of different social class mixed together in schools to a greater extent in Wales and Scotland than England and Northern Ireland. In other words, social segregation was less in Wales and Scotland than elsewhere.
- **There** was no evidence that the comprehensive system depressed overall attainment. Average levels of attainment in Wales, which had a fully comprehensive system, were no different to England and Northern Ireland.
- **In** all four systems girls had higher attainment than boys.
- **Social** class was a major determinant of attainment in all four systems. However, social class made less difference to attainment in Scotland than in England.
- **The** social mix of pupils attending a school also made an impact on the attainment of pupils. However, in Wales and Scotland, where there was a more fully comprehensive system of schooling, the effect of school composition on attainment was lower than elsewhere.
- **Schools** varied more in their impact on attainment in England than in Wales and Scotland.

### Similarities in education to age 16

There are strong similarities in the provision of education to the age of 16 between the four territories of the United Kingdom. In each system attendance at school is compulsory (and free) between the ages of 5 and 16, and the curriculum is broadly similar in spite of the different definitions of the 'national curriculum' in each system. During the last two years of compulsory schooling pupils study seven or eight general subject courses. Public examinations at around 16 provide certification of young people's attainments during their time at school. In Scotland these examinations are the Scottish Certificate of Education (SCE) Standard Grade, while in the other three systems the examinations are the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).

### Types of schools

The greatest difference between the four systems is the different pattern of comprehensive *vs* selective schooling. Amongst pupils attending schools in the public sector in 1990/91, all pupils in Scotland and almost all pupils in Wales were educated in comprehensive schools. In England a minority (7%) were educated in selective schools – either Grammar schools or Secondary Modern Schools. In Northern Ireland there were no comprehensive schools, the system was entirely selective.

The proportion of pupils attending independent schools varied (England: 11%, Wales: 3%, Scotland: 6%). In areas of Britain where many pupils attended selective or independent schools, comprehensive schools could not be considered fully comprehensive because some of their potential pupils were 'creamed' to the selective or private sectors.

There were also differences between the territories in the proportion of pupils attending denominational schools (England: 19%, Wales: 7%, Scotland: 14%). In Northern Ireland all secondary schools were either Roman Catholic (RC) or non-RC, so that in reality all pupils could be considered as attending denominational schools. The proportion of pupils attending single-sex schools also differed in the four territories, being lowest in Scotland (3%), followed by Wales (15%) and England (18%), and highest in Northern Ireland (33%).

### Social segregation between schools

If pupils from high social backgrounds attend different schools than pupils from low social class backgrounds there is social segregation between schools. Our study showed that there was more social segregation between schools in England and Northern Ireland than in Scotland and Wales. To some extent this was because more pupils in England and Northern Ireland attended independent or grammar schools, and pupils attending these types of schools tended to have higher socio-economic status (SES) than pupils in comprehensive schools and secondary modern schools. In Scotland more pupils with relatively high SES attended comprehensive schools than was the case elsewhere.

However, in addition there were differences in social composition between comprehensive schools in terms of the average SES of pupils attending the school. These differences, which were found in all four systems, arise from differences between catchment areas, and may be intensified by parental choice of schools.

### Sources of inequality in attainment at 16

Differences between the four systems in the pupil and school characteristics which influence attainment are summarised below.

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**Sources of inequality in attainment: similarities and differences between systems**

**Sex**
Girls had higher attainment than boys:
- *same in all four systems.*

**Socio-economic status**
Pupils had higher attainment than average if parents were in professional or non-manual occupations, and father was in work:
- *effect of SES strongest in England.*

**School type**
Attainment higher in independent and grammar schools than comprehensive schools and lower in secondary modern schools:
- *more pupils attended independent schools in England;*
- *more attended grammar schools and secondary modern schools in NI and England than elsewhere;*
- *effect of independent schools weaker in Scotland than elsewhere.*

**School denomination and gender**
Attainment higher in denominational and single-sex schools:
- *effect of denomination weaker in Scotland;*
- *fewer pupils attending single-sex schools in Scotland.*

**School composition**
Attainment higher if the average SES of the school was high:
- *effect of school composition greatest in England.*

**'School effect'**
Average attainment was higher in some schools than in others:
- *differences between schools were greater in England and Northern Ireland than in Wales and Scotland.*

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In all four systems girls had higher attainment than boys. This suggests that the factors affecting gender differences in attainment are common to all four education systems.

In all four systems social-class inequality had an impact on attainment. However, the effect of social class on attainment was weaker in Scotland (and to a lesser extent Wales) than in England. This suggests that although there were common factors in all systems which led to social class inequality in attainment, these factors were stronger in England than elsewhere. The greater extent of social segregation in England than Wales and Scotland is part of the reason for this. We are less confident in conclusions about social class effects in Northern Ireland because of issues of data comparability.

### School differences in attainment

On average, attainment was higher in independent schools and grammar schools, and lower in secondary modern schools, than in comprehensive schools. Attainment was also higher in RC and single-sex schools than in non-denominational or mixed-sex schools respectively. These differences were broadly similar in all the territories which had each type of school, but the advantages of independent schools and RC schools were weaker in Scotland than elsewhere.

The social composition of the school had an effect on the attainment of pupils attending the school. Schools in which the average SES was relatively high because the school was attended by a high proportion of pupils with professional and well-educated parents, had higher average attainment than schools with relatively lower average SES. However, the effect of school social composition was weaker in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than in England. In other words, attending a school with high average SES boosted the attainment of a pupil in England to a greater extent than in the other three systems. This effect was irrespective of whether the school was selective or not.

There was considerable variability in attainment between schools in England and Northern Ireland after taking account of all other factors. This might be termed the 'school effect'. Schools in Scotland and Wales were much more similar to each other in their average attainment.

It has been suggested by critics of comprehensive schooling that overall levels of attainment are depressed by the comprehensive system. Our study found no evidence of this. In Wales, which had a fully comprehensive system, and very few independent schools, average attainment was no different from that of England and Northern Ireland. The different examination system in Scotland makes it less easy to include Scotland in this comparison.

### Conclusions

The analyses described in this *Briefing* show many similarities between the four educational systems of the UK. Gender differences in attainment are the same in all four systems. The effects of social class on attainment are broadly similar in all four systems and average attainment between the four systems is relatively similar. However, there were major differences between the four systems arising from the extent of differentiation between schools in terms of selection, school type, denomination and gender and also social composition. These differences between schools were associated with differences in attainment. The school systems in England and Northern Ireland were characterised by a great deal more social segregation and differentiation between schools than those of Wales and Scotland. In addition, there was greater variability between schools in average attainment in England and Northern Ireland than in Wales and Scotland.

The persistence of selection between schools in Northern Ireland was a major source of differentiation in the experiences and attainment of pupils. There were large differences between grammar schools and secondary modern schools in the SES of pupils entering the schools and attainment of pupils at the end of their compulsory schooling. Schools were also split by denomination and gender. Compared with these major sources of differentiation, the effects of pupils' SES and school social composition were of less importance than in England.

Schools in Scotland and Wales were more comprehensive in every sense than schools elsewhere in the UK. There was less variance in SES intake between schools in Wales and Scotland, and less variance between schools in average attainment. Added to this, the effect of school social composition on attainment was weaker in Scotland and Wales than in England. Altogether we can conclude that in Wales and Scotland it was far less important for pupils to attend the 'right' school than was the case in England.

## Issues for Policy

There is continuing debate in England and Northern Ireland as to whether the selective system of schooling should be replaced by fully comprehensive systems. The evidence from this research provides support for the comprehensive system; it shows:

- there is less social-class inequality in the two education systems which are wholly comprehensive;
- selection is not the only source of inequality within education systems – other sources of differentiation include independent schools, denominational schools, single-sex schools and social segregation between schools;
- there is no evidence that overall levels of attainment are affected by the extent of selective or comprehensive schooling;
- standards across schools are more uniform in the two systems which have least differentiation between schools.

## Related publications

Croxford, L., Raffe, D. and Brannen, K. (2000) "Social inequalities, attainment and comprehensive schooling", CES Working Paper.

Raffe, D. (1998) "Does learning begin at home? The use of 'home international' comparisons in UK policy-making", *Journal of Education Policy*, 13, pp.591-602.

Raffe, D. (forthcoming) "Investigating the education systems of the UK", *Oxford Studies in Comparative Education*, issue on the *Education Systems of the UK* (ed D. Phillips).

Raffe, D., Brannen, K., Croxford, L. and Martin, C. (1999) "Comparing England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: the case for 'home internationals' in comparative research", *Comparative Education*, 35(1), pp.9-25.

## Further information

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## About this study

The Home Internationals Project was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (R000236840). The project reviewed existing statistics and research, interviewed policy-makers in the four territories, and constructed and analysed an integrated dataset on the experiences and transitions of young people in the early 1990s. This dataset was based on: the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study of young people aged 16 on August 31 1990, surveyed in spring 1991, spring 1992 and spring 1993; the Scottish Young People's Survey of the year group in S4 in 1989-90, surveyed in spring 1991 and autumn 1993; and the Northern Ireland Secondary Education Leavers' Survey of secondary school leavers, surveyed in 1992 and 1994/95. All the English and Welsh sample members, and nearly all the Scottish sample members, completed compulsory education in 1990. The Northern Ireland sample described 1992 school leavers, and had to be converted to a year-group basis for the study.

## Related CES *Briefings*

No 12: "Parental Choice and Education Policy" by JD Willms

No 16: "Inequality in the first year of primary school" by L Croxford

No 18: "'Home International' Comparisons of Post-16 Education and Training" by D Raffe

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